

Systemic Change

The Theme of the Vincentian Family for the Upcoming Two Years

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In an address given in 1979, Pope John Paul II stated: “Social thinking and social practice inspired by the Gospel must always be marked by a special sensitivity towards those who are most in distress, those who are extremely poor, those suffering... from hunger, neglect, unemployment and despair. You will also want to seek out the structural reasons which foster or cause the different forms of poverty in the world and in your own country, so that you can apply the appropriate remedies.”

Structural thinking does not come easily to us. It requires an informed understanding of the real circumstances of the poor, patience analysis, and a disciplined search for solutions. Beyond that, structural change demands dialogue, collaborative action, and perseverance. But without structural thinking and structural change, the root causes of poverty remain embedded in society, even if programs that we set up are successful in dealing with some symptoms.

With that in mind, in recent years the Vincentian Family has been focusing more often on systemic change. Of course, in a Family like ours, providing immediate service and working for systemic change are not an “either/or” option. They are a “both/and” imperative. It is important for us, on the one hand, to work to meet the immediate needs of the poor. On the other hand, it is crucial that we also help in promoting long-term change. Over the last two years some important steps forward have been made in that regard.

I. BACKGROUND

In 2006, with the encouragement and support of a foundation, the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, Fr. Gregory Gay, named a Commission for Promoting Systemic Change and gave it the following mandate: *To help bring about systemic change through*

the apostolates of the members of the Vincentian Family, especially those ministering to the oppressed poor.

The members of the Commission are: Sr. Ellen Flynn, D.C., director of The Passage, a multi-faceted program for helping to rehabilitate homeless people in London; Fr. Norberto Carcellar, C.M., the founder of the Philippine Province's work at Payatas and subsequent housing and micro-lending projects in Manila and elsewhere; Fr. Pedro Opeka, C.M., founder and director of Akamasoa ("good friends") and of the construction of 17 villages for those formerly living in a garbage dump in Madagascar; Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M., coordinator of the collaborative work of the Community of Sant'Egidio and the Daughters of Charity in DREAM, a project for combating AIDS, especially in Africa; Fr. Joseph Foley, C.M., NGO representative of the Congregation of the Mission at the United Nations; Mrs. Patricia Nava (AIC), Representative of AIC for relationships with the international Vincentian Family; and Mr. Gene Smith (SSVP), Executive Director of Seton Institute in Daly City, California.

Each year at their annual meeting, the heads of various branches of the Vincentian Family choose a common theme for reflection and action for the year ahead. The theme is launched on September 27th, at the annual Family Day of Prayer. In 2006, the Family's reflection revolved around **creativity**. The main challenge was to bring to life Saint Vincent's words: "**Love is inventive even to infinity.**"

This year the heads of the Family, gathered in Rome, invited the members of the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change to make a presentation. Afterwards, "Systemic Change" was chosen as the Family's focus for at least the coming two years (2007-2009).

II. THE GOALS OF THE COMMISSION AND THE WORK DONE SO FAR

1. Goals

When the General Council named the members of the Commission, it asked the members:

- To study available material concerning Systemic Change,
- To discuss the members' own involvement in Systemic Change,
- To formulate a series of "best practice" recommendations (effective strategies) which will subsequently be shared with the members of the Vincentian Family,
- To propose how the effective strategies might best be disseminated among the members of the Family throughout the world.

2. What has been done so far

To respond to its mandate, the Commission started to reflect about Systemic Change and how to share the results of its work. At the beginning of the process, each of the members of the Commission wrote a story based on his or her own experience, describing a work in which Systemic Change has been implemented. In each one of the stories presented, The Commission identified some strategies that might be used in working toward Systemic Change in projects among the poor. Particular emphasis was placed on self-help and self-sustaining programs, so that the poor themselves are active participants in the planning and realization of the projects envisioned. The Commission stressed the spirituality that lies behind a systemic-change approach in the Vincentian Family.

At the same time the Commission has been working on various ways to communicate the work it is doing:

- A book, entitled *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change*, that will be published in various languages and distributed throughout the world,
- A Tool kit containing brochures, short documents, DVDs, suggestions for workshops, etc.,
- A special issue of *Vincentiana* or other periodicals,
- Courses, seminars and workshops for leaders and multiplying agents,
- Proposals for promoting good money management within our Family and among the poor we serve, with a special view toward addressing the root causes of poverty.

III. SYSTEMIC CHANGE APPROACH

A. *Some clarifications about the notion of Systemic Change*

Systemic Change aims not only to serve the immediate needs of the poor (by providing food, clothing, etc.), but also to assist the poor to develop effective strategies by which they can emerge from poverty. The notion of “systemic change” should not be confused with “systematic change” (that is, planned, step-by-step change); “systematic change” can have very positive effectives, but “systemic change” goes further. It aims at changing a whole complex of structures that form a social system within which we live.

A system functions as a whole through the interaction of its various parts. Its elements affect each other constantly as they interact, either for better or for worse. Unemployment or low wages, poor housing, an unhealthy diet, deficient healthcare, and low-quality

education are usually not separate problems; rather, they are often intimately linked with one another. “Systemic change” aims at transforming an entire series of interacting elements, rather than just some of them. This requires changing attitudes that cause the problems we hope to solve. A systemic-change approach offers tools to interpret our experience and focuses on how the system’s elements interact. It devises means for promoting structural change within a whole system. Basically, systemic-change thinking helps us, in the words attributed to Albert Einstein, “**to learn to see the world anew**”.

EXAMPLE:

We can illustrate this process with “**The Perfect Storm,**” one of the stories on Systemic Change proposed by Gene Smith, from the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in the USA. Gene relates what happened in San José de Ocoa. The project there began by focusing on water, but gradually it came to encompass many other elements in the life of the community. Gene tells the story as follows:

*Systemic change occurred in this community when, thanks to a visionary leader, a number of positive elements intersected, resulting in a transformed community. A “**Perfect Storm**” of joined efforts and events transformed the lives of many poor people.*

*Traditionally, twinning in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul involves aid sent from one Conference to another, enabling the members in poor countries to give direct assistance to some of the most needy. Jack, the leader, came up with the creative idea of “**cluster twinning**” whereby large numbers of conferences and councils in the United States would send twinning support to an irrigation project through the San Jose de Ocoa Conference and, subsequently through other new conferences in the Dominican Republic.*

In no time, large sums were sent for needed equipment to build aqueducts and buy pipes. Work brigades of people from many villages were formed. When Jack returned to Ocoa, after two years, he could not believe what he saw. Everything was green and the water system had spread. He saw one village helping another, and so on. There was a holistic effect.

The excellent work led to many spin off projects:

- *Aqueduct and irrigation work,*
- *water purification plants,*
- *provision of private/shared potable water,*
- *replacement of roof and dirt floors,*

- *creation of home gardens for greater nutrition,*
- *farming cooperatives,*
- *latrines for sanitation,*
- *home building.*

Now water flows to more than a hundred villages. By bringing water to the villages, nutrition and health improved, opportunities for work resulted and the communities grew closer.

B. The spirituality that lies behind Systemic Change

The concept of “systemic change” is a contemporary one. It was unknown in St. Vincent’s time, though St. Vincent himself expressed many related ideas. When he gathered the first group of women to form a “Confraternity of Charity” at Chatillon-les-Dombes in November 1617, he stated, in the Rule he composed for them (SV XIII, 423), that the poor sometimes suffer more from lack of “order” than from lack of charitable persons. He continually urged the members of his Family to love the poor “spiritually and corporally” and “affectively and effectively.” He encouraged his followers to examine various elements in the lives of the poor to see what their most important needs were: nourishment, health care, education, work, spiritual care, etc. Today we are conscious that the poor live within a social system where some or many of these elements are lacking, a system that, if changed, can help a person emerge from poverty.

There are three key phrases in the Vincentian tradition, that today are moving us more and more, in our various branches, not only to assist the poor in their immediate needs by providing food, clothing and shelter, but also to assist them to change the social system within which they live, so that they might emerge from poverty.

The first phrase is that our love is to be both “*affective and effective.*”¹ St. Vincent repeated this theme over and over again. He says, for example, “*The love of a Daughter of Charity is not only tender; it is effective, because they serve the poor concretely.*”²

The second phrase is that we minister to the poor “*spiritually and corporally.*”³ St. Vincent uses this phrase in speaking to all the groups he founded: the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity. He tells the Daughters of Charity that they should tend not only to bodily needs, but also share their faith by their witness and their words. Conversely, he

¹ SV IX, 475, 592, 599; XI, 40.

² SV IX, 593.

³ SV IX, 59, 593; XI, 364.

warns the members of the Congregation of the Mission that they should not think of their mission in exclusively spiritual terms.⁴ Rather, they too should care for the sick, the foundlings, the insane, even the most abandoned.⁵

The third phrase is that we are to proclaim the good news *“by word and work.”* St. Vincent was deeply convinced that what we say and what we do must reinforce one another. First, do. Then, teach. That is St. Vincent’s rule for **“effective” evangelization**. In other words, he sees preaching, teaching and human promotion as complementary to one another, and as integral to the evangelization process. Today, the unity between evangelization and human promotion, so much a part of St. Vincent’s spirit, is one of the main emphases in the Church’s social teaching.⁶

In light of these three phrases, so fundamental in our family’s spirituality, the Commission is attempting to respond concretely to the appeal that Pope John Paul II addressed to the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in 1986: *“Search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long-term solutions — adaptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so you will work for the credibility of the gospel and of the Church.”*

C. Effective strategies and Stories about Systemic Change

The Commission has spent a significant amount of time identifying the strategies that bring about effective systemic change. It considers these strategies to be very important, if not indispensable, for producing long-range results in the lives of the poor.

In order that they might be examined more carefully, the strategies have been divided into four categories: mission-oriented strategies, task-oriented strategies, people-oriented strategies, and strategies oriented toward co-responsibility, networking and political action.

Along with each group of strategies presented below, a systemic-change story is offered as an illustration.

⁴ SV XII, 87: “If there are any among us who think they are in the Congregation of the Mission to preach the gospel to the poor but not to comfort them and have them assisted in every way, by ourselves and by others.... To do this is to preach the gospel by words and by works....”

⁵ SV XI, 393.

⁶ Cf. Synod of Bishops, 1971, *Justice in the World*, in AAS LXIII (1971) 924: “... action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world are integral elements in the preaching of the gospel.” Cf. also, *Centesimus Annus*, 5.

Mission-oriented strategies (motivation and direction)

- ⇒ Consider poverty not as the inevitable result of circumstances, but as the product of unjust situations that can be changed, focusing on actions that will break the circle of poverty,
- ⇒ Design projects, creative strategies, policies and guidelines that flow from our Christian and Vincentian values and mission,
- ⇒ Evangelize and inculcate Christian and Vincentian values and our charism, by maintaining a profound respect for the local culture.

EXAMPLE:***Akamasoa, “City of the Good Friends”***

This project brings together several strategies for systemic change, while focusing on fidelity to the Vincentian mission. The story takes place outside Tananarive, the capital of Madagascar. The poverty of those who live in a garbage dump there is a scandal that runs contrary to human dignity.

When Fr. Pedro Opeka, C.M., first arrived in Madagascar, he could not believe the misery around him. He asked himself: “What is there to do for the hundreds of families that live in outrageous conditions in the midst of the garbage?” He started searching for a solution with some members of the community. They discerned that working in the quarry might be a good departing point.

Soon they started excavating boulders for construction. The work of the women was very important at this stage, and has continued to be so. With the money they obtained, the workers bought rice and building tools, and gradually they were able to begin building their own lodgings.

Today, those first settlements have become real urban communities, with all sorts of services. On Sundays, five or six thousand persons congregate for praising the Lord for all they have received.

*None of this could have been possible without strong individual, family, and societal discipline, grounded in personal responsibility and a firm belief in Providence. As Akamasoa has become known around the world, the project has expanded into **seventeen towns**, thanks to the work of the people, the guidance and support of their leader, Fr. Pedro, and the generous help of the Congregation of the Mission, other organizations, and individuals.*

Task-oriented Strategies (organization)

- ⇒ Start with a serious analysis of the local reality, flowing from concrete data, and tailor all projects to this reality,
- ⇒ Have a holistic vision, addressing a series of basic human needs — individual and social, spiritual and physical, especially jobs, health care, housing, education, spiritual growth — with an integral approach toward prevention and sustainable development,
- ⇒ Implement coherent strategies, starting modestly, delegating tasks and responsibilities, and providing quality services respectful of human dignity,
- ⇒ Systematize, institutionalize and evaluate the project and its procedures, describing measurable indicators and results,
- ⇒ Make the project self-sustaining by guaranteeing that it will have the human and economic resources needed for it to last,
- ⇒ Be transparent, inviting participation in preparing budgets and in commenting on financial reports. Maintain careful controls over money management.

EXAMPLE:

Homeless People's Federation Philippines

When this project started, several branches of the Vincentian Family — the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, AIC, SSVP, and the Vincentian Marian Youth — started working together in Payatas, in the slums of Manila.

After a serious analysis of the local reality, they started a holistic project, intended to satisfy the primary needs of the people working in this enormous garbage dump in the capital.

The central element that glued the whole community together was a savings program that functioned 24 hours a day, coordinated by Fr. Norberto Carcellar, C.M.

A whole ongoing formation process was started in order to empower the poor themselves, so that they became the main agents of their own development. From a simple savings and loan program in Payatas, the work of the Homeless People's Federation Philippines (HPFP) has evolved, mobilizing urban informal settlers and slum dwellers around shelter and land tenure issues. In case of natural disasters, the Federation offers help and support to the members and to the poorest of the poor.

As its work has grown, the HPFP has found ready partners and collaborators among various institutional stakeholders; namely, professionals, academicians, local governments, national agen-

cies, international organizations, and multi-lateral institutions. Gradually, a broader system of support is evolving, a social system made up of networks of communities implementing strategies to manage community resources.

People-oriented Strategies (focusing on the poor as the persons who are most capable of changing their own situation)

- ⇒ Listen carefully and seek to understand the needs and aspirations of the poor, creating an atmosphere of respect and mutual confidence and fostering self-esteem among the people,
- ⇒ Involve the poor themselves, including the young and women, at all stages: identification of needs, planning, implementation, evaluation and revision,
- ⇒ Educate, train, and offer spiritual formation to all participants in the project,
- ⇒ Promote learning processes in which the members of the group, especially the poor themselves, speak with one another about their successes and failures, share their insights and talents, and work toward forming effective multiplying agents and visionary leaders in the local community, servant-leaders inspired by St. Vincent de Paul,
- ⇒ Construct structural and institutional models, where communities can identify their resources and needs, make informed decisions, and exchange information and effective strategies within the community and among various communities,
- ⇒ Promote engagement in political processes, through civic education of individuals and communities,
- ⇒ Support and respect the mechanisms for promoting solidarity that exist among the community members.

EXAMPLE:

I have a D.R.E.A.M.

Since 2002, Project DREAM has been applying in Africa, with extraordinary success, the standards of treatment now used in developed countries. Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) chose it as a case study for treating AIDS. In 2004, the Daughters of Charity and the Community of Saint Egidio asked Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M., to be the coordinator of their joint labors in this project.

Giving particular attention to the sufferings of sick persons, DREAM provides high-quality drug treatment, called triple therapy, to children and adults who are HIV-positive. Its special

focus is to prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS from a mother to her new-born child and to maintain the ongoing health of the mother. 98% of the children born with the program are completely HIV-free. Almost all their mothers are still alive.

When Ana Maria first arrived to participate in DREAM she weighed a skeletal 64 pounds. Upon discovering that she was HIV positive, her husband had left her and her neighbors isolated her. As she struggled to take care of her six children she realized that she was dying. She said that the stigma was killing her as much as the disease. Today she and her children are well. Treatment helped her so much that, as her medication was phased down, her immune system became almost normal. In fact, Ana Maria is filled with fighting talk and enthusiasm as she promotes the struggle against AIDS actively, fuelled by her awareness that she would be dead if she had not received treatment.

Joãozinho has become a symbol of DREAM and one of its most loved patients. He was the 1000th baby born to HIV-positive women receiving treatment. Like other children born in DREAM before and since, he now has the chance to lead a healthy life. Joãozinho has great reason to rejoice as he faces the future: his mother is alive and healthy and will take care of him in the years to come.

DREAM takes a holistic approach, addressing a series of basic human needs: especially health care, nutrition, and education. The project has now spread into ten African countries, with others on the waiting list.

Strategies oriented toward co-responsibility, networking and political action (participation and solidarity)

- ⇒ Promote social co-responsibility and networking, sensitizing society at all levels — local, national and international — about changing the unjust conditions that affect the lives of the poor,
- ⇒ Construct a shared vision with diverse stakeholders: (poor communities, interested individuals, donors, churches, governments, the private sector, unions, the media, international organizations and networks, etc.),
- ⇒ Struggle to transform unjust situations and to have a positive impact, through political action, on public policy and laws,
- ⇒ Have a prophetic attitude: announce, denounce, and, by networking with others, engage in actions that exert pressure for bringing about change.

EXAMPLE:***AIC-Madagascar. To be transformed in order to transform***

AIC in Madagascar, a country towards which Vincent de Paul channeled great efforts, keeps his charism alive to this day. Recently, this association changed from a few unrelated, disarticulated groups into an important national network, part of the international AIC.

At present there are thirteen groups, whose members are all poor women who work very hard to alleviate the poverty of their families and of their communities. Networking is one of the association's guidelines. This has allowed it to reach goals that could have not been achieved otherwise.

*Madagascar's internal network **links with other networks**, above all with the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, who participated in the founding and ongoing development of the association in the country.*

The internal network also collaborates with and receives support from international organizations like UNICEF and other groups, which help through subsidies, didactic materials and food.

AIC-Madagascar has been recognized by UNICEF as a privileged partner, and Madagascar's volunteers have been invited to speak at various international meetings where they have shared their experience in assisting children. Their nutritional projects have been selected as pilot projects that serve as an example for others.

Decision-makers have listened carefully to their recommendations in regard to the nutrition of children, maternal care, prevention of violence, and responsible paternity.

The capacity to listen, ongoing formation, empowerment, political action and networking lie at the basis of the volunteers' work in Madagascar. Their projects show their clear commitment to a global effort to eradicate poverty.



This article has provided just a short introduction to the theme of Systemic Change, along with a few brief descriptions of systemic-change projects. Much more could be said about each of the examples presented. Moreover, many other similar projects surely exist within the Family. The Commission for Promoting Systemic Change would welcome news about them. By sharing that news, the branches will encourage each other in working toward long-range solutions in assisting the poor.

This is the prayer that the Commission has formulated for the Vincentian Family as it begins to focus more intensely on the theme of Systemic Change:

We praise and thank you, O God, Creator of the universe.

You have made all things good and have given us the earth to cultivate.

Grant that we may always use created things gratefully, and share them generously with those in need.

Give us creativity in helping the poor meet their basic human needs.

Open our minds and hearts so that we might stand at their side and assist them to change whatever unjust structures keep them poor.

Enable us to be brothers and sisters to them, friends who walk with them in their struggle for fundamental human rights.

We ask this through Christ Our Lord.

Amen